

Strategic Retreat
#27 Genre: Literary Fiction, 1002 Words
By Melitón Moya

Old Man leaned against his favorite mesquite tree, which dominated the backyard. He looked at the nine individuals assembled under the palapa. He had purposely arranged the benches and chairs to accommodate social distancing but the nine guests unconsciously moved the furniture around to accommodate different pairings. Mary, Sylvia, and Elly sat on one bench. Forest, Twix, Henry, and Aronia sat on a bench directly across from them. John sat by himself on a chair situated to Mary's right and Grace sat by herself on a chair situated across from John to Elly's left. The center table was set with a pitcher of Old Man's special concoction made from mesquite beans and a few other secret ingredients. Old fashioned aluminum tumblers, a large tray of brownies and another of oatmeal cookies completed the setup. All would be drunk and devoured before the guests left Old Man's sanctuary.

"That's an incredible story. The nine of you took me on a kaleidoscopic trip across time and space, storylines and genres, fact and fiction."

Not understanding, Mary interrupted Old Man. "What do you mean?!"

"Before I answer, help me understand what's actually happening here now. Why do you think you are immune to the COVID-19? Why are you disregarding social distancing? Why are you not wearing face masks?" Old Man paused to study their response.

The three girlfriends looked at each other, at John and Grace, and at the four allies sitting across from them. Sylvia spoke.

"Well, we're all friends and I didn't think...." She stopped in mid-sentence, stood up, and moved to one of the chairs located at the perimeter of the palapa.

Everyone else did the same except Mary, who sat alone on the bench, looking confused.

"What's difficult to understand about our story?" Her forehead furrowed.

Old Man chose his words carefully because he found it difficult to speak with people who think they know what they don't know. "Well, Mary, apparently you are the protagonist in the story. You trust Sylvia and Elly. You are sure Jing Lui betrayed you. You trust Grace even though she's a spy and you know how spies are." Grace started to get up from her chair but chose to sit without saying a word.

"You trust John who suddenly reappeared in your life." Mary and John looked into each other's eyes without saying a word. "And, you are convinced Apophis, Michael Rothschild, and Sam, his and Grace's daughter as I understand it, and their force of Crawlmares, are to be feared."

Mary interrupted Old Man once more. "I don't understand what you're getting at!"

"Mary, you are an intelligent individual. You easily attract people into your inner circle. But, tell me, why were you hospitalized? How long were you hospitalized?"

"I don't know. I wish someone would tell me. Things are happening too fast and it's so confusing. You're right, the story does seem to have been dreamed up by 20 people but it made

sense to me until you started asking questions. What's your point?"

"Well, most people around the world are having a hard time with isolation, loneliness, stress, anxiety, fear of uncertainty, grief, depression, trouble sleeping, and strange dreams."

"All of that!" Elly shouted out like a child being told about her weekly chores.

"Yes, that and more. And, yet, here you are, just like half the population in the United States, denying what you're going through and thinking you are above it all."

Mary looked at everyone. When no one said anything, she asked, "Why is that?"

"You are an American. Independent. Optimistic. Skeptical. Entitled."

Mary thought carefully about what Old Man had said. "Entitled?"

"Yes, Americans think they deserve what they want even if it's not in their best interest."

"OK. I understand and agree with you. But what does that have to do with the facts we spent most of the afternoon telling you?"

"Mary, it's an incredible story. I believe all of you believe it." He looked at Forest, Twix, Henry, and Aronia. "What about the four of you? What do you have to say?"

Aronia turned to look at Old Man. "The story is true for the most part. Some of it is embellished. Some of it is confabulation. It's been four very difficult months from the first incident until now. Time and space travel not included."

Henry followed up. "Do you think we should tell them what we did with the seeds?"

"Yes! Let's tell them," Twix chimed in. "Tell them, Forest!"

Forest took a good long look at Grace and then at John. "OK. But first, Grace, are you really a spy working for the U.S. government?"

Grace looked directly at Forest and said, "Yes."

Forest then looked at John, who volunteered, "I am too. Sorry, Mary. I was going to tell you."

"But, you didn't!" Mary looked chagrined. "Is anybody being honest with me about what's happening?" She looked at Old Man. "Are you being honest with me?"

"You have to decide that, Mary."

Mary then looked at Forest. "What did you do with the seeds?"

"Mary, does the number 195 mean anything to you?"

Mary searched her memory and replied, "No, it doesn't."

"That's the number of countries in the world today; 193 recognized by the United Nations plus 2 non-member observer states: The Holy See and the State of Palestine."

"What does that have to do with the seeds?" Mary asked with the frustration of a person lost in what she's trying to understand.

"Well, which one of the countries should get the five female Sassafras seeds?"

"Why, America, of course! Who else?! America will make sure the whole world will get the vaccine that's developed from them. Where are the seeds?"

"Reproducing. Look at the field in front of you. You're looking at them at work. Our intention is to distribute the harvest to the 195 Dr. Faucis of the world." He looked at each of

them in turn, pressing his point.

“However, the fight with Apophis is not over.”

Melitón Moya decided to participate in the “Let’s Write A Story” project to study the writing styles and the collaborative writing process and egos of eighteen writers including himself. He spent the first 27 years after graduating from high school working as a public servant and obtaining a college degree in psychology and sociology from Pan American University and a Ph.D. in psychology (clinical and social) from the University of Colorado at Boulder. He followed that with a 20 year career as a software developer and education management consultant. He has spent the last six years studying the writing and publishing processes, researching, and writing books, poems, and essays among other professional and personal activities that he enjoys.